Love and Peperoni Pasta

By: Ervin Kosch - 4/16/2026

Marcus and Kara had been together forever. They were supposed to meet up after high school. Memorial Day stretched into the 4th of July. Then Labor Day became Christmas, which became another summer.

This cycle lasted four years. Each proclaimed their love, but they were miserable the rest of the time. Then I got involved. Kara and I had grown up together since second grade.

A recent Wednesday we took a long lunch and talked about what was happening between her and Marcus. She'd called that morning, her voice tight and strained in a way I'd never heard. She needed to talk to someone who knew them both, who wouldn't judge. At least, that's what she said.

Over sandwiches at the Gracious Grains Deli near my office, she told me everything. The fights that started small—about money, about plans, about nothing—had hardened into something crueler. Marcus would shut down, disappear into himself for hours or days. Kara would reach for him and find only silence. Then one of them would break, and they'd collapse into each other again, desperate and temporary, like drowning people grasping for the same piece of driftwood.

"I don't know how to let him go," she said, stirring her coffee without drinking it. "But I don't know how to stay either."

I listened. That's what I was good at—listening to Kara. I'd always been good at it, since we were kids and she'd tell me her secrets under the bleachers at recess.

What I didn't tell her that day was that I'd always been in love with her.

I hadn't told anyone that. Not even myself, really. But sitting across from her in that fluorescent-lit deli, watching her pick at a salad she didn't want, it felt like the most obvious thing in the world.

After that day, Kara started calling me more. Texting. We'd meet for coffee, drinks, long walks through the park. Marcus didn't know how much time we were spending together. I wasn't sure if Kara knew, really—or if she was deliberately not thinking about it.

Summer turned to fall. The spaces between Marcus and Kara grew wider. I watched it happen like a slow-motion car crash, desperate to stop it and unable to look away.

One night in October, Kara showed up at my apartment. She'd been crying. Marcus had found messages on her phone—nothing explicit, nothing damning, but enough. Enough to make him feel betrayed. Enough to send him out the door for the night, saying he needed space.

"He's right," she said, pulling her knees to her chest on my couch. "I've been leaning on you. Using you as an escape."

I looked at her, and something in me shifted. This pattern had dragged on for years. Four years of watching Marcus and Kara circle each other, pull apart, come back together. Four years of being Kara's lifeline while she stayed with someone who made her miserable. Four years of me pretending I was just being a good friend.

"You're right," I said. "You have been using me as an escape. And I've let you."

She looked up, surprised.

"You need to decide, Kara. Right now. Not tomorrow, not next week. Go home and have a real conversation with Marcus. Not the kind where you both cry and make up. The kind where you actually figure out if you two can fix this or if it's over."

"Rubin—"

"I'm serious. Either you commit to making it work with him—couples therapy, whatever it takes—or you end it. But this thing we're doing? This has to stop. I can't keep being your backup plan."

She stared at me. I could see the guilt in her eyes, but also something else. Relief, maybe. Like she needed someone to finally say what she already knew.

"And if I can't make it work?" she asked quietly.

"Then you end it. Cleanly. But you don't use me to do it. You do it because it's the right thing, not because you've already got somewhere else to land."

Week One

Kara left my apartment that night without saying much. Just a quiet "okay" and a hug that lasted a second too long. I watched her walk to her car from my window, wondering if I'd just made the biggest mistake of my life or finally done something right.

She didn't call the next day. Or the day after.

I told myself that was good. It meant she was actually dealing with it. Having the hard conversations instead of running to me.

But on the fourth day, my phone buzzed at two in the morning.

Can't sleep. He's getting worse.

I stared at the message before responding.

What happened?

The three dots appeared and disappeared. Appeared again. Then my phone rang.

"I tried to make him dinner," she said when I answered. Her voice was flat, exhausted. "I remembered he used to love this pepperoni dish his mom made. I thought maybe if I made something he liked, something that reminded him of better times, we could have a nice night. Talk. Really talk, like you said."

"And?"

"He came home and saw it on the table. Asked where I got the recipe. I told him I looked it up online, tried to recreate it from memory. And he just... he lost it, Rubin. Started asking if I'd talked to his mom. If I was going behind his back. Then he asked if *you* had suggested it."

I closed my eyes. "Kara—"

"He accused me of having an affair. Over sausage. Over me trying to do something nice." She laughed, but it was hollow. "He didn't eat it. He left. Came back three hours later and acted like nothing happened. Kissed me goodnight. Told me he loved me."

I didn't know what to say. That I was sorry? That she deserved better? She already knew both.

"I can't do this anymore," she said quietly. "I thought maybe I could. I thought if I just tried harder, loved him better, gave him more space or less space or whatever he needed. But I can't. Because I don't even know what he needs. I don't think he knows either."

"So what are you going to do?"

Long silence. I could hear her breathing on the other end.

"I don't know yet," she said. "But I know I can't stay."

We talked for another hour. Not about Marcus, not about us. Just about nothing. The weather. A movie she'd watched. Her job. Normal things. Safe things. And when we finally hung up, I felt something I hadn't felt in a long time: hope. Not for me and her. Just hope that she might actually be okay.

Week Two

Kara called her parents on a Tuesday afternoon. I know because she texted me right after.

Just asked if I could stay with them for a while. Mom cried. Dad asked if Marcus hurt me. I said no. Not the way he means.

What did they say?

That my room is exactly how I left it.

I smiled at that. Kara's childhood bedroom, frozen in time. Posters of bands she didn't listen to anymore. A bookshelf full of young adult novels she'd read a dozen times each. The opposite of the apartment she shared with Marcus—the one that never felt like hers, where she was always walking on eggshells, always trying to anticipate his next mood.

That weekend, she told Marcus they needed to talk. Really talk. But not yet. She needed a few days to gather her thoughts, to figure out what she wanted to say.

Marcus didn't take it well. He wanted to talk right then. Wanted to fix whatever was broken immediately. But Kara held firm, and I was proud of her for that. She was learning to set boundaries, even small ones.

She asked me to meet her for coffee on Thursday. Not at our usual place—somewhere new, somewhere neutral. A little café I'd never been to, tucked away in a part of town neither of us frequented.

She looked different. Tired, but also lighter somehow. Like she'd been carrying something heavy for so long that she'd forgotten what it felt like to stand up straight, and now she was finally remembering.

"I'm leaving him," she said before I could even sit down. "I'm going to tell him this weekend. I'm moving to my parents' house. I'm starting over."

I sat down slowly, processing. "How do you feel?"

"Terrified," she said. "But also... relieved? Is that awful? I still love him. I think I'll always love some version of him. But I can't keep loving the person he's become. And I can't keep waiting for him to turn back into who he was."

"That's not awful," I said. "That's honest."

She smiled, just a little. "I wanted to tell you in person. To say thank you. For telling me what I needed to hear, even when it was hard. For not letting me hide from it."

"You don't have to thank me."

"I do, though. Because you could've just... let me keep coming to you. Let me keep using you as an escape. But you didn't. You made me face it."

We sat there for a while, drinking our coffee, not saying much. It felt like an ending and a beginning at the same time—like we were finally closing a chapter we'd both been stuck in too long.

"What happens after?" I asked. "After you leave?"

"I don't know," she said. "I guess I figure out who I am without him. Who I am when I'm not trying to fix something that's already broken."

"And us?"

She looked at me, really looked at me, and I saw something in her eyes I'd never seen before. Clarity.

"I need time, Rubin. I need to be alone for a while. To not lean on anyone—not Marcus, not you, not anyone. I need to learn how to stand on my own."

I nodded. It hurt, but it was the right kind of hurt. The kind that meant something was finally healing.

"I understand," I said. And I did.

Week Three

Kara told Marcus on a Sunday evening. She'd asked him to sit down, said she had something important to say. She'd rehearsed it a dozen times, practiced the words until they felt less like knives and more like truth.

She told me about it later, after it was done. After she'd packed her things and driven to her parents' house and sat in her childhood bedroom, surrounded by the ghosts of who she used to be.

"I told him I still loved him," she said over the phone. Her voice was steady, but I could hear the exhaustion underneath. "I told him I didn't want to hurt him. But I also told him I couldn't keep doing this. That he needed help. That I didn't know what he was running from, but I couldn't fix it for him. That I just wanted the old Marcus back, but I didn't think he was coming back."

"What did he say?"

"He cried. He begged me to stay. Promised he'd change, that he'd get help, that things would be different. And I almost believed him, Rubin. I almost stayed."

"But you didn't."

"But I didn't. Because I've heard those promises before. And I realized that even if he meant them, even if he really did change, I'd already changed too. I'd already decided I couldn't live like this anymore. And that was enough."

Marcus had helped her carry her boxes to the car. He stood in the driveway and watched her leave, and she looked at him in the rearview mirror until she turned the corner and he disappeared.

"Do you think he'll get help?" I asked.

"I don't know. I hope so. For his sake, not mine. But that's not my responsibility anymore."

She sounded different. Stronger. Like she'd been holding her breath for four years and had finally remembered how to exhale.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm okay," she said. And then, after a pause: "I'm actually okay."

I saw Kara one more time before she asked for space. She wanted to drop off some books she'd borrowed over the years. I told her to keep them, but she insisted.

She showed up at my apartment on a Wednesday afternoon, carrying a canvas bag full of paperbacks and hardcovers, some dog-eared and annotated in her handwriting.

"I can't believe you kept all of these," I said, flipping through a novel I'd lent her in college.

"Of course I did. They were yours."

We stood in my doorway, and for a moment, I thought about telling her everything. How I'd loved her since we were kids. How I'd watched her choose Marcus over and over again. How I'd hoped that maybe, someday, she'd choose me instead.

But I didn't. Because I realized this wasn't about me anymore. It wasn't about me getting what I wanted—it was about her getting what she needed. And what she needed was space. Time. Freedom.

"Thank you," she said, and I knew she wasn't just talking about the books.

"You're going to be okay," I said.

"I know." She smiled, and it was real. "I really think I am."

She hugged me, and I hugged her back. When she pulled away, I watched her walk down the hallway to the elevator. She didn't look back. She didn't need to.

And for the first time in years, I felt something I hadn't expected: peace. Not because I'd gotten what I

wanted, but because she had. Because she'd chosen herself. Because she was free.

I closed the door and looked at the stack of books she'd left on my table. On top was a note, written on torn notebook paper in her familiar handwriting:

Thank you for being my friend. Thank you for telling me the truth. Thank you for letting me go.

I'll see you on the other side of this.

—K

I folded the note and slipped it into my pocket. Then I sat down on my couch and let myself feel everything I'd been holding back—the love, the loss, the hope, the grief. All of it.

Outside, the sun was setting. Light streamed through my window in long golden streaks, and I pictured Kara in her childhood bedroom, unpacking her life, starting over. I thought about Marcus, alone in their apartment, maybe finally confronting whatever he'd been running from. And I thought about myself, sitting here in the fading light, finally letting go.

It wasn't the ending I'd imagined. But it was the right one.

And that was enough.